

BIOGRAPHY



ELEANOR OF TOLEDO



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ELEANOR

CHARACTER: ELEANOR OF TOLEDO (Leonor Álvarez de Toledo y Osorio)

DATES: Alba de Tormes 1522/ Pisa 17 dicembre 1562

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: SPAIN (Italy)

HISTORICAL PERIOD: XVI century

SUMMARY: Eleanor of Toledo married the Duke of Florence Cosimo I de' Medici. Together they built one of the richest and most influential courts of 16th century Europe.

Eleonora was distinguished for her culture and intelligence as well as her beauty, which is still talked about today.

KEYWORDS: court, cultured, elegance

GENRE: BIOGRAPHY

AGE: 9 - 10 YEARS

AUTHOR: Barbara Lachi

ELEANOR

On a bright June morning, Eleanor left Naples.

It was the second time in her life that she undertook a long journey, the first one had taken her from Spain to Italy.

She was only twelve years old at that time, her father had been elected viceroy of this rich and beautiful city, which had welcomed and hosted her for five years. She had fallen in love with the sea, the great spaces, and the elegant buildings that her father had restored and enlarged.

One day she was told that King Charles V of Habsburg was to give her hand in marriage to the Duke of Florence. Although she had an older sister, she was the one that was chosen.

The wedding was celebrated in Naples not with her real groom who was waiting for her in Florence, but with someone who had come to represent him.

Her groom, Cosimo I de' Medici, was only two years older than her and she had never seen him except in a few portraits they had shown her. Eleanor felt a little scared, but she also knew that this was her destiny and accepted it as she had been taught.



Garcia, her brother and other members of the court accompanied her to the port where seven vessels awaited her, in which her enormous dowry would be transported.

The journey lasted eleven days, the waves lulled her dreams.

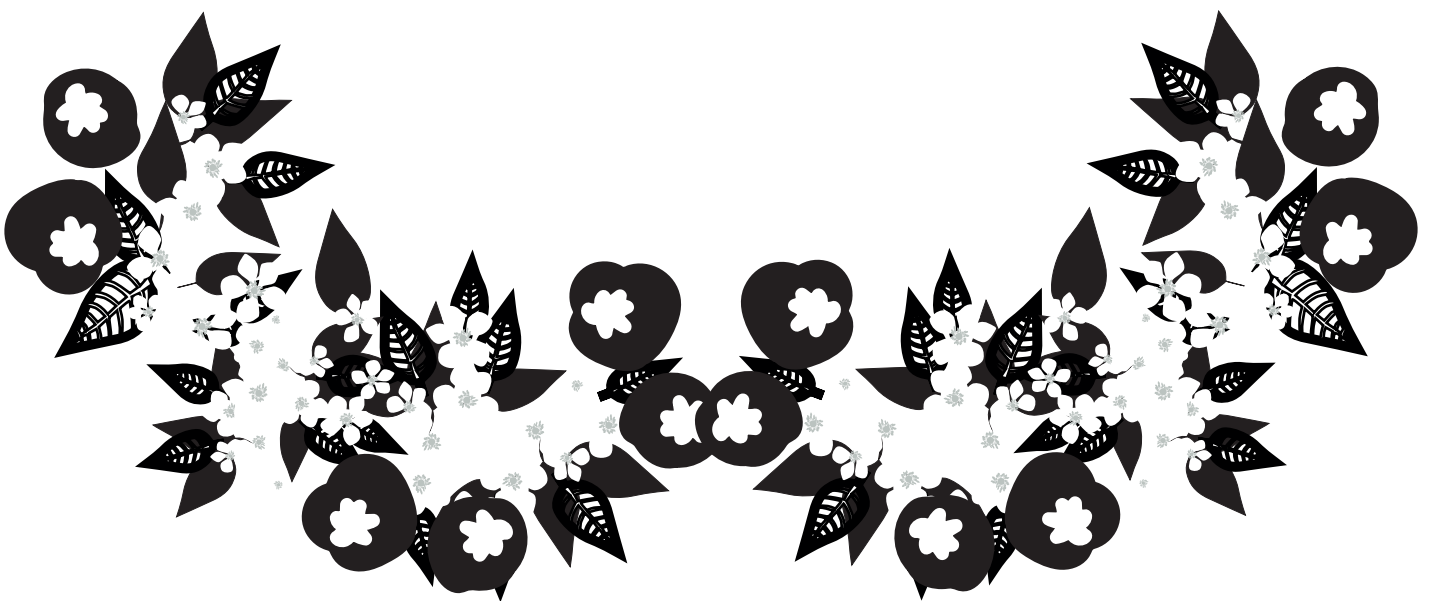
When she reached the port of Livorno, she boarded carriages in the direction of Pisa. Halfway there she finally met Cosimo.

They looked at each other and each recognised in the other the person with whom they would share their lives.

Not because someone had forced them but because they had chosen each other. Both their hearts leapt and they simply said “it is you!”

Cosimo had prepared a beautiful celebration, the whole city of Florence was decorated with festoons, flowers, papier-mâché works. He had called in the greatest artists so that everything would be up to the standard of his bride.

The gate of the city had been transformed into an arch of triumph.



It was hot in the city, even though they had chosen to arrive in the afternoon. Along the streets there were hundreds of people praising her. Eleanor looked even more beautiful, her perfect face, her soft golden-blond hair, her tapering hands, her elegant figure in her red dress, embroidered in gold, which shone so that it made her look like a goddess.

Cosimo looked at her adoringly.

“Now you will make your entrance into the city. I will wait for you in the church of San Lorenzo where our wedding will be celebrated.” Eleanor, hoisted up on a richly harnessed white horse, walked through the streets of the city, surrounded by nobles, pages, musicians and the jubilant crowd, all the way to the cathedral and then again to San Lorenzo and finally to the palace that would become her home.

Cosimo had it luxuriously decorated, the banquet for the festivities lasted for days with singing and dancing, just like in fairy tales.

Cosimo and Eleanor were happy.

Their life together was starting. They trusted each other and Cosimo especially realised how valuable his wife’s pieces of advice were, without which he made no decisions.

Eleanor, who was not only beautiful but also cultured and intelligent, knew how to administer the enormous fortune she had brought as a dowry and used it to improve the city and their lives.

Eleanor liked beautiful things, so she surrounded herself with the best artists, Benvenuto Cellini, Bronzino from whom she commissioned paintings and jewellery.

She had the finest fabrics flown in from Naples, but later, she had her own tapestry workshop set up in Florence, a true textile industry. The noise of the looms spinning invaded the whole of Florence, punctuating and giving rhythm to the days.

Eleanor had a personal tailor from whom she commissioned not only her own clothes but those of the entire family and servants, transforming Florence into a true “royal” court.

She wore feather-covered hats and precious belts, marvellous jewellery and perfectly shaped or baroque pearls that adorned her entirely, punctuating her clothes, her hairstyles or wrapping around her neck. Even the first loving glance she exchanged with Cosimo became a jewel, a cameo that Eleanor always carried with her.



She surrounded herself with artists as well as poets and poetesses, Laura Battiferri, Gaspara Stampa, Tullia d’Aragona, and became for them a patron. She created a cultural association, the Accademia degli Elevati, for the study of prose and poetry.

The house had become too small and Eleanor decided to move into the Palazzo della Signoria, having it adapted and decorated to accommodate everyone. “I want Bronzino to do affreschi and also family portraits.” Agnolo Bronzino was an excellent portrait painter; his portraits looked like living people behind a frame. Children would sit for hours posing while he painted their eyes, the exact colour of their cheeks, the nuances of their hair. Eleanor posed with her son Giovanni and then Francesco.



In the first of these portraits, she wore a magnificent gown of white silk brocade, embellished with an embroidery of gold and silver threads drawing pomegranates. Her face competed in brightness with the iridescent reflections of the dress.



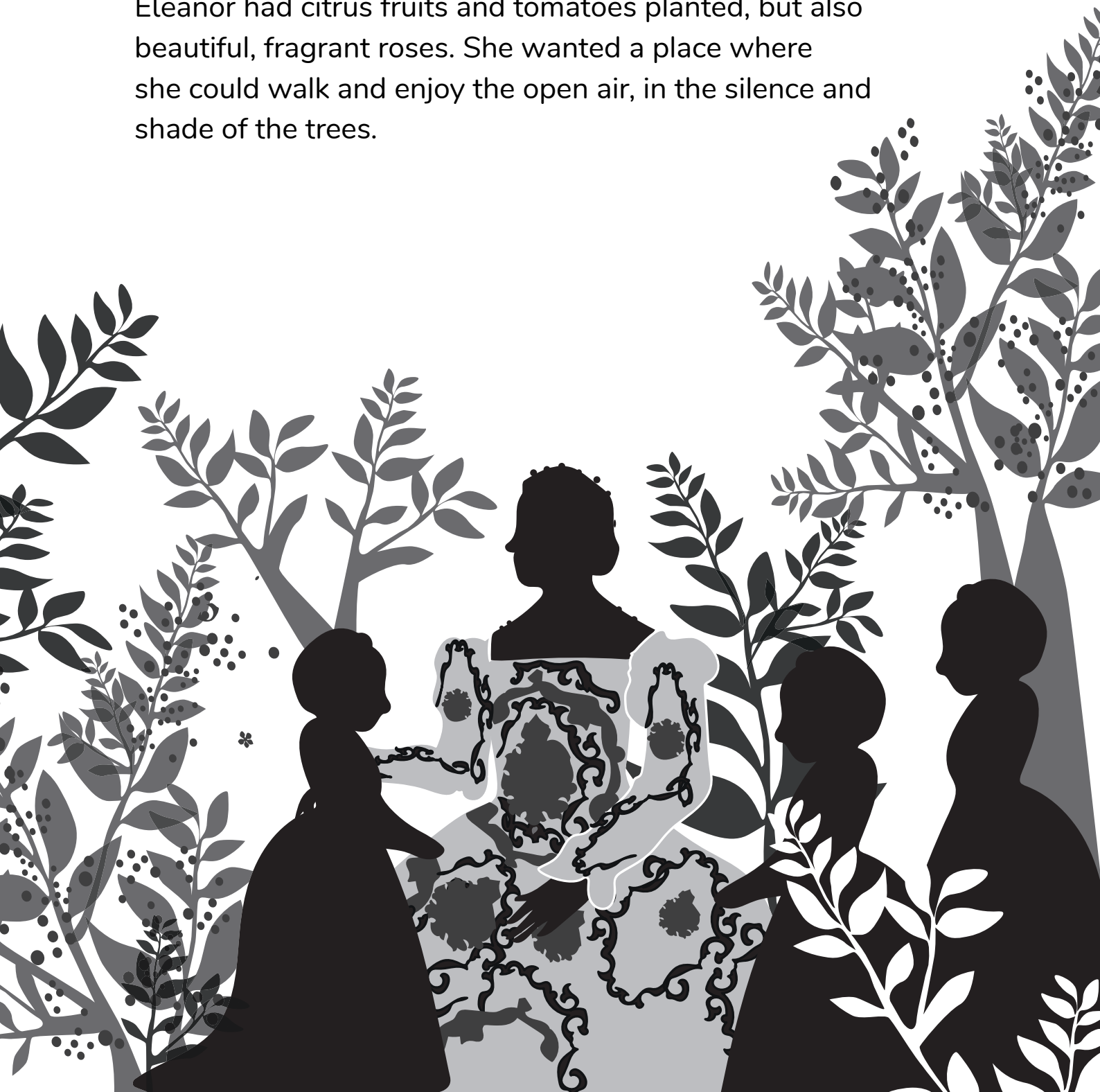
However, her favourite colour remained red, and in fact in the second portrait she wore such a dress, edged with gold embroidery that decorated it symmetrically, with wide sleeves that tightened at the wrists, and over this she wore a zimarra, a typical Spanish-style jacket. But red were also the silk knitted stockings brought from Naples and the bodice she slept in to keep warm.

Often Cosimo was away, and she administered the court to take his place, meeting with government representatives, each time arousing admiration for her competence.

Eleanor was generous and donated to the city's poor, but did so almost incognito. When she went out, her face was covered, or she used a green velvet litter, in which she was carried, without ever lifting the curtains, so that no one could ever see her. In the eyes of the people of Florence, she seemed too aloof, perhaps they would have liked to see more of her, they found her obnoxious and too cold, and perhaps what they did not like was that in so many years, Eleanor had continued to speak Spanish instead of learning Florentine.

The air in Florence, however, had other problems, it was very dirty and contaminated so Eleanor once again decided to change houses. She and Cosimo had had eleven children and that is also why she bought the large palace on the other side of the Arno River.

She also bought the neighbouring land because she wanted to make a park and a vegetable garden out of it, and had the restoration and modernisation work begin immediately. Eleanor had citrus fruits and tomatoes planted, but also beautiful, fragrant roses. She wanted a place where she could walk and enjoy the open air, in the silence and shade of the trees.



Eleanor, despite her young age, had been ill with tuberculosis for some time. The court painter, called in again to portray her, depicted her slimmed body and delicate skin. Neither the sumptuous clothes nor the marvellous jewellery could restore her ancient beauty; she looked like a flower about to wither. Eleanor, however, let nothing stop her, not even her backache, for which she had a bodice made of metal splints lined with turquoise taffeta to help her bear the pain better.

The years passed and Eleanor was increasingly admired and loved in every court in Europe, her style, elegance and intelligence were a point of reference everywhere, she was not only a wife and mother but a true “sovereign”. Among the many beautiful things that Cosimo and Eleanor experienced together there were, however, also many moments of sadness; they saw many of their children die. However, not even these painful events could separate the two. In order to continue to enlarge their possessions and demonstrate once again how powerful they were, Cosimo went to the lands near the city of Grosseto. There were many swamps here that made the air contaminated and many people were dying from malaria. Cosimo wanted to reclaim them to make them habitable.



Eleanor was sad every time Cosimo went away, she was homesick and felt a pang in her heart from missing him. So, she decided to surprise him and left with her sons Garzia and Giovanni. They stopped to sleep in the Palazzo di Rosignano, perhaps too close to those contaminated lands. All three of them fell ill. Their fevers quickly became high and the two children died. Hoping perhaps to save her, they told her about the fate of her children only after three days had passed, but Eleanor, by then gravely ill, could not bear this umpteenth pain.

Taken back to Florence, she was dressed in a beautiful red dress, her favourite colour, decorated with her jewellery, buccole and gold hoops. On her finger was the ring with the cameo representing her and Cosimo, on that first shining day they met, joined together in their first glimpse of eternal love just like in fairy tales.





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